

MANCHESTER SOCIAL HOUSING ALLOCATIONS SCHEME REVIEW

BRIEFING PAPER #2: APPROACH TO THE REVIEW

The main objective of the review was that the scheme provides the means of managing the allocation of a scarce resource (social housing) in a fair and equitable manner, focusing on those in greatest need.

Challenges and options

In undertaking the review it made little sense to consider the position of those applicants outside of the reasonable preference categories in the lower bands (4-6), the vast majority of whom will never successfully bid for a social home. The challenge was to consider whether or not it is reasonable to distinguish between different high priority (reasonable preference) groups of applicants, giving some a higher priority on a new allocations scheme. In doing that, it is inevitable that other groups in the reasonable preference categories will have lower priority and therefore have significantly reduced likelihood of making a successful bid for a social home.

The work stream and member discussions outlined the challenges faced and highlighted some of the possible options in devising a new allocations scheme and asked members to give consideration to how different aspects of the current scheme could be changed to inform the development of a revised allocations scheme.

Access to rehousing is determined by two things: first, **qualifying** to join the register then, secondly, **priority** on the register. Both have been revised to contribute to improving access for the agreed priority groups of applicants.

QUALIFICATION TO JOIN THE HOUSING REGISTER

Residency and local connection

The current scheme takes no notice of residency but does take account of local connection. Local connection is assessed using the statutory homelessness test, which is that applicants have local connection if they have lived in an area for 6 months out of the last 12 or for 3 years out of the last 5, or have close family living in an area, or have a job in an area. Currently, applicants without local connection are placed in band 6 until such time as they acquire local connection in one of the ways described.

People often confuse residency with local connection. They are not the same.

Government recommends a period of continuous residency in a housing authority's area as a qualification criterion and has suggested 2 years as a minimum qualifying period. This is separate from "local connection". Manchester currently does not require applicants to have a period of continuous residency in order to qualify to join the housing register. It has been agreed to introduce 2 years' continuous residency as a qualification to join the housing register, with certain exemptions and exceptions.

Manchester has taken the view that applicants should have the same exemptions from the new residency tests as they do from local connection tests. The 1996 Act requires local authorities to exempt certain categories of applicants from local connection tests: statutory homeless cases, qualifying members or former members of the armed services, those in

commissioned supported accommodation, verified rough sleepers, people fleeing domestic violence and those who qualify under the Right to Move regulations. These categories of applicant are also exempt from Manchester's new residency tests.

Not everyone with local connection will have 2 years' continuous residency. Such applicants will not qualify unless they are exempt. An example would be an applicant who has a close relative living in Manchester (therefore has local connection) but who has not lived in Manchester continuously for 2 years (therefore does not pass the residency test). Conversely, all applicants that meet the residency requirement, by definition, have local connection because they are living here.

Consequently, local connection is no longer referred to in the allocations scheme. Instead, the scheme refers only to 2 years' continuous residency.

Financial resources

Current policy is that if a household has an income of over £60,000 p.a. or savings of £75,000 or more, their application will be placed in band 6. These financial levels are particularly high when compared with other local authority schemes. It was agreed to retain the current income threshold but to lower the savings threshold to £30,000 on the basis that this is sufficient for an applicant to pay a deposit for either a mortgage or a private sector rented home. Under the new allocations scheme, the financial thresholds are matters of qualification, rather than priority and any applicant with income or savings above the new thresholds will no longer qualify to join the housing register.

Home-owners

Government guidance recommends that a scheme should make home owners a non-qualifying category subject to some exemptions for people who are not able to cope in their current home (for example due to disability). Currently applicants who are home-owners are placed in band 6. It was agreed to make home ownership a matter of qualification rather than priority and home owners will therefore not qualify to join the housing register unless they are in the exempt categories.

PRIORITY ON THE HOUSING REGISTER

Community contribution

The current scheme awards additional priority for applicants who are contributing to their community, for example by working or volunteering. Additional priority means that applicants in bands 3 or 5 are lifted to bands 2 or 4 if they are contributing. This has been a popular and successful priority award since the current scheme was introduced in 2011. But over time this priority award has become a barrier to rehousing for those in greatest need. Almost all lets are to bands 1 and 2 while the majority of homeless and other applicants in crisis sit in temporary accommodation at great cost to the council in band 3 from where they are unlikely to be rehoused. It was agreed to remove additional priority for contributing, instead focusing entirely on housing need.

Overcrowding

The number of bedrooms a household needs is determined by using the national 'bedroom standard'

The current scheme awards band 1 for very severe overcrowding (3 bedrooms short) and the new scheme will continue to do so. Apart from such severe overcrowding, the current scheme treats all overcrowding equally, placing applicants in band 3 or band 2 if they are contributing.

The new scheme differentiates between being 2 bedrooms short or 1 bedroom short, and further differentiates between certain categories of applicants who are short by 1 bedroom. All applicants who are short by 2 bedrooms are in new band 2. Most applicants short by only 1 bedroom are in new band 3. The exceptions are applicants 1 bedroom short who either live with another household, or who live in 1 bedroom accommodation and have children. These exceptions are in new band 2.

Homeless applicants

- Applicants who have a home but are threatened with homelessness and are owed the homelessness prevention duty are in new band 3.
- Applicants who have been assessed as intentionally homeless but in priority need are in new band 3.
- Applicants who are homeless and are owed any of the other homelessness duties (the 'Relief Duty' or the 'Full Duty') are in new band 2.

Assessment of moving group

The term "moving group" refers to the people that can be included in an application. The definition of a Manchester moving group has been changed.

Moving groups now only include

- the applicant
- the applicant's spouse or partner
- children under 21 of either the applicant or partner so long as those children normally live with that parent
- grown up children over 21 so long as they remained living with that parent full time after they turned 21
- any close adult relative living with the applicant who is dependent on the applicant for care or who provides care to the applicant
- a carer who is not related to the applicant if they need to live with the applicant to provide overnight care
- any two people who wish to live together in non-family type accommodation

This change helps to make applicants look at their housing options more realistically and therefore have a better chance of being rehoused.

Consultation, engagement and approval

Engagement with our Manchester Move partners has been continuous since the review began. The work stream meetings ensured that our partners understood what the issues and challenges were.

The formal consultation with our partners took place over three months during spring 2019. We ensured that other key partners such as Manchester Women's Aid, Crisis and Shelter were also included in the consultation. Responses were supportive of the proposed changes.

The review received a lot of media coverage, including on social media.

A public consultation exercise, in the form of an online survey, was undertaken during July and August. The majority of responses were very supportive of the proposed changes.

Executive approved the proposed changes at its November 2019 meeting.
